Eastern African Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences
Vol. 5 No. 2 (2026): ISSN (Online): 2958-4558
DOI: https://doi.org/10.58721/24dkne66
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Article History
Received: 26.02.2026
Revised: 10.08.2026
Accepted: 22.08.2026
Published: 23.08.2026

Keywords
Cultural rituals
Gender inequality
Stigmatisation
Widowhood

How to cite:
Mkhize, T. R., & Myende, T. M. (2026). Unshackling widowhood bondage in amplifying SDG#5: Experiences of Township widows in South Africa. *Eastern African Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences, 5*(2), 802-820.

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Abstract
Sustainable Developmental Goal (SDG) 5 of the United Nations, Agenda 2063 of the African Union, and the National Development Plan (NDP) 2030 implores the signatories, including South Africa, to promote and support gender equality and human rights for all. Literature shows that widows within Southern African cultures remain shackled in bondage manifesting as discrimination, neglect, cultural and psychological oppression. The research question guiding this study is: What are the experiences of Township widows in Gauteng province? A qualitative research approach within radical feminism in the feminist paradigm was adopted, employing a participatory methodology for data collection, such as individual interviews from twenty township widows living in Gauteng. Using thematic data analysis, the findings revealed that widows are exposed to in-law weaponisation of rituals, community stigma and discrimination, dispossession of assets by in-laws and absence of support systems. Against these experiences, widows yearn for support and spaces of belonging. This is a qualitative study conducted in a township context in Gauteng. Thus, findings cannot be extended to other contexts. From the experiences of these widows, the paper recommends a need to create space for societal reflections on how societies can provide care and support for widows and how widows can be empowered. This study plugs the gap in literature and practice where limited strategies exist to address isolating and discriminative practices metered against widows in Africa. The study's major contribution is proposing a framework for supporting widows in African contexts.

Introduction
Gender equality is at the epicentre of Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5), which seeks to eliminate all forms of violence and harmful behaviours against women and girls (United Nations 2015). While many countries globally have committed to promoting gender equality by adopting SDG 5, its actual effectiveness remains largely underexplored, especially in terms of their impact on widows lived experiences (Omondi et al., 2026). South Africa is not immune from the phenomenon of gender imbalances, inequality and inequity (Mpofu, 2025). Widowhood is one of the worst experiences that chains and subdue women without mercy (Mabunda & Ross, 2023; Dube, 2023; Fahs, 2024). In this study we view the aspect of widowhood bondage utilised in the title as constituting an ambiguous situation in which a widow, while mourning the loss of her spouse, is still considered married (Ramphele, 1996, p.99-117). Pauw (1990) also points to this practice with the following statement: A widow's marriage is not terminated by the death of her husband but has been, as it were,



only temporarily interrupted, to be continued after the period of mourning, ideally by an agnate of the late husband. (p. 85) Like heavy shackles in prisoners' legs,

> *The widow becomes the embodiment of loss and pain occasioned by the sting of death, and her body is turned into a focus of attention, as both subject and object of mourning rituals. The individual suffering of a widow is made social, and her body becomes a metaphor for suffering. (Ramphele, 1996, p. 7)*

The severity of cultural practices meted out to widows, especially in Africa, demonstrates gendered violence and violation of human rights (Nwadialor & Agunwa, 2021; Shoko & Danke, 2024). Widows are women who take on the title of being a widow upon losing a spouse to death and yet to remarry (Brown, 2016; Nasir, 2021). However, society seems to forget that behind the title of being a widow is an ordinary human being. This can be seen in the harsh cultural rites such as bathing in cold river water, placing hands on the chins to signify loss (Ajayi et al., 2019), invasive cleansing rituals (Shoko & Danke, 2024), and being stripped of their assets and the title of being a wife and a mother (Fasanmi & Ayivor, 2021) remains a direct attack and contradiction to ubuntu philosophy (Mosala, 2026). In worst cases, widows have been accused of causing a husband's death (Nasir, 2021). This article argues that such practices infringe on widows' dignity and human rights. While the South African Constitution and Bill of Rights explicitly assure equality and that no person should be discriminated against based on gender (Republic of South Africa, 1996), widows continuously bear harsh human rights violations from cultural practices in society. The Constitution is merely a document, and it remains the responsibility of all citizens to ensure that its pronouncements are realised (Albertyn, 2019). We argue in this paper that the SDGs are interwoven and cannot be understood in silos (Mkhize, 2025). The focus of Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5) (United Nations, 2015) to address gender inequality will never be fruitful if widows are left behind from the transformation agenda because widows are not separate from women and, thus, should not be overlooked in universal women empowerment strategies. In this article, using the radical feminism theory, we examine the plight of widows and how their agency is thwarted by being widows in the context of patriarchy. We further examine various support systems and structures towards the support of widows. Radical feminism in an African context aims to dismantle male supremacy and the root structures of patriarchy. Finally, this study proposes a radical feminist framework for sustaining widows.

Literature Review

In reviewing the literature, we explore dehumanising widowhood rites. Next, we discuss the stigmatisation of widowhood. This is followed by a discussion on trampling on widows' rights. Lastly, we discuss strategies for supporting and sustaining widows.

Dehumanising widowhood rites

Widowhood rites comprise cultural practices and rituals after a spouse's death (Ajayi et al., 2019). Although many people globally encounter the death of a spouse, widowhood rites are entrenched in the cultural practices of African people, affecting widows. Widowhood rites vary throughout African societies. However, one thing to note is the level of humiliation and stigma that is commonly associated with being a widow. Upon the death of a spouse, widows must partake in mourning activities to rid themselves of the negative aura that is believed she is carrying and, thus, highly contaminable unless they are cleansed (Fasanmi & Ayivor 2021). In many parts of Africa, such as Kenya, Zambia and Malawi, widows are sexually cleansed to rid them of evil spirits and to integrate them back into the community to fulfil wife inheritance (Okech, 2019; Munala et al., 2022; Waria, 2018). Furthermore, in countries such as Nigeria, widows are obliged to shave their hair off and drink water

used to wash the husband's corpse to prove that she is not involved in his killing (Ajayi et al., 2019). In the South African context, research by Matlabe-Danke (2024) highlights a cultural belief across many Black African communities that a husband cannot simply die of natural causes**.** Thus, a widow is obliged by cultural norms to participate in rituals to prove and defend her innocence. Oyeniyim & Ayodeji (2010) postulate that in other Nigerian parts that follow the Islamic religion, widowhood rites are not as severe as death is associated with God's will. However, widows must mourn for months at a time in the meantime experiencing neglect.

Stigmatisation in widowhood

In South Africa, widows are subjected to stigma and exclusion from their communities due to cultural beliefs that associate widowhood with bad luck, curses, or other negative connotations. Stigma exposes widows to extremely isolated and discriminating positions (Dube, 2023). According to the UN Women (2021), widows face additional discrimination and inequality due to their gender. Shoko and Danke (2024) add that widows are stigmatised within their communities and social activities. We argue in this paper that social stigma and discrimination have forced many widows into bondage and human suffering.

Widows are perceived as 'cursed' and marginalised by their communities (Dube, 2023). For example, in Zimbabwe, widows are blamed for their husband's death and are subject to abuse and harassment (Isilow, 2017). In Kenya, widows may be accused of causing their husband's death through witchcraft. In Nigeria, widows may be accused of killing their husbands or engaging in immoral behaviour (Izzi & Fab-Eme, 2020). In South Africa, Mabunda and Ross (2023) mourns that widows may be subjected to inhumane practices such as cleansing ceremonies, which can be traumatic and humiliating. Thomas (2021, p.8) captured how widows were subjected to discrimination and unfair practices in the North-West Province in South Africa and shares that:

> *"During the traditional mourning period, bereaved spouses were required to adhere to mandatory social restrictions. This period was marked by relative isolation for the bereaved and, in the end, stigmatisation and ostracisation. After the traditional mourning period, the bereaved spouses underwent mandatory traditional cleansing, after which they could fully be reintegrated into their communities".*

Trampling on widow's rights

Even when prisoners are shackled in chains, they still have legal rights within the South African constitution (Republic of South Africa, 1996). We ask the question: Why are widows' rights in South Africa trampled upon and not recognised like all other citizens? We ask this question because, in addition to cultural attitudes, legal barriers remain insurmountable for widows (Dube, 2023). Kimeu (2022) states that the legal system may be slow, corrupt, or even discriminative against women, making it impossible for widows to be protected and to exert their rights in communities. Addressing these legal barriers requires legislative reforms, judiciary practices, and the promotion of gender equality (Human Rights Watch, 2017). Kotze et al. (2012) state that in South African families, the deceased's uncle is expected to share the family's material possessions with the extended family, with the widow having no say during this dispossession process. Baloyi (2016) argues that, ironically, women often violate other women's rights in the cultural practices that take place during the mourning period. The studies highlighted above confirm that the experiences of widows after losing their spouses include, for example, poverty, health disparities, legal challenges, alienation from social activities and stigmatisation.

Unearthing strategies for supporting and sustaining widows

Even though the problems of widowhood have drawn global attention and interventions from the United Nations, African widows seem to have the least benefit from commissioned research and interventions (Dube, 2023). Ramphele (1996) studied political widowhood in South Africa. Motsoeneng and Modise (2020) explored widows' social isolation and the stigma experienced in rural South Africa. Barros-Lane et al. (2026) conducted a systematic review that employed a socio-ecological framework to investigate the challenges of early spousal loss. Thomas (2021) captured how widows were subjected to discrimination and unfair practices in the North-West Province in South Africa. Many studies have identified challenges faced by widows; however limited studies offer strategies for addressing challenges faced by widows in Africa. Therefore, the main contribution of this study is to plug this gap.

This study argues that it may be pivotal for South Africa to enact and enforce laws that protect the rights of widows grounded on the constitution and Bill of Rights (Republic of South Africa, 1996; Matlabe-Danke, 2024). Countries can pass and enforce laws that protect widows' rights to property, inheritance, and other resources. This can help to prevent exploitation and mistreatment and ensure that widows have access to the resources they need to support themselves and their families (Dube, 2022). We believe that providing psychosocial support through counselling services, support groups, and other interventions presents a vital strategy to address these challenges widows face (Sekgobela et al., 2020) in addressing the challenge of stigmatisation, public education campaigns, media outreach, and engaging with local leaders and community members to promote more inclusive and supportive attitudes (Pemunta & Alubafi, 2016). Finally, social movements have a history of transforming oppressive circumstances in South Africa. We argue that widows can mobilise resources for their emancipation through the collective voice. Mkhize and Davids (2023) found that resource mobilisation strategies, such as creating sustainable partnerships, multi-stakeholder engagement, and income-generating projects, were critical for mobilising resources in deprived contexts. Therefore, a radical feminist voice within a social movement is critical for mobilising resources for an effective machinery that addresses widows' challenges (Zald, 2017; Manky, 2018). Next, we discuss the theoretical framework that undergirds this study.

Theoretical review

To foreground the understanding of social practices of widowhood rites entrenched in patriarchal social order, we draw insights from radical feminists who claim the division of the sex and gender system as the root of women's subordination to men and encourages transformation of gender hierarchies which regulate the character, role, and status of women in the patriarchal system (Millett, 1970). According to Millet, in her work "Sexual Politics" (1970), patriarchy is a system of sexual politics in which men dominate women through biological, ideological, coercive, psychological, and social institutions such as class, family, economics, and education, as well as myth and religion. This demonstrates that women are often positioned as objects and lack full control over their bodies (Saifeeva, 2024). Millet's perspective allows this study to examine how patriarchy manifests and is experienced by widows.

Influenced by various progressive social movements such as the civil rights movement, student activism, and the hippie movement, radical feminism emerged predominantly during the 'second wave' of feminism starting from the 1960s in Western countries, notably in France, England, Canada, and particularly the United States (Razali & Oktaviana, 2023). Samkange (2015) confirms that:

> *Radical feminism and Liberal feminism are some of the approaches that have been employed to explain inequalities and oppression within societies. These are two opposing approaches in terms of*



> *how they advocate for change and reform. The Radical Feminists advocate for revolutionary means to tackle oppression which they believe is a result of the biological differences between men and women. On the other hand, Liberal Feminists advocate for a moderate approach to bringing about change. Such an approach involves the use of legislation and an incremental strategy to bring about change (p. 1172).*

According to feminist theory, society is structured so that all aspects of society are dominated by more powerful groups over the minority ones. Men are considered to have more power and opportunities and, thus, use this privilege to inflict dominance (Connell ,1987; 1995; Paechter, 2018). American feminist, Kate Millet's (1970) key concept, sexual politics, advances the idea of men's dominance and women's subordination as performed in marriage and family everyday life, institutions that form key sites of women's oppression within which patriarchy thrives. Millet defines politics as the power relations that emerge when one group of individuals is under the control of another. Her assertion, "the personal is political," demonstrates that women's personal experiences have a significant political dimension and should not be underestimated.

Similarly, radical feminist Shulamith Firestone (1970) in her work, The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution, contends against patriarchy's character to oppress women depicting it as a sex-class system permeating itself in all spheres of life in a society that naturalises gender roles. African feminist, Amina Mama (1995) centres patriarchy as a system of power sustained by institutions such as the state and family where women's subordination is depicted as a moral obligation. Another key mechanism through which patriarchy sustains itself is Rich's (1980) idea of compulsory heterosexuality which highlights male dominance as socially woven and imposes women's sense of identity and desires. We argue that it is this privilege that cultivates a social order that perpetuates discrimination and violence against widows, with culture functioning as an ideological tool that legitimises and reinforces patriarchal dominance. We adopted radical feminism as a principal theory under the umbrella of feminist theory to illuminate patriarchy as a significant impediment towards widows' emancipation in society (Firestone, 1970). Patriarchy grants widowhood rites to perceive widows as in need of cleansing, to be seen as bad luck and prone to ill-treatment by society (Dube, 2023), practices that male counterparts are not expected to perform. African women's bodies become politised and topics of discussion within patriarchal systems (Tamale, 2011; Gqola, 2015). As Ferguson (2017) explained, feminist theory seeks not just to depict oppressive gendered systems that prevail in society but also to challenge essentialist dualistic thinking in which gender hierarchies are naturalised and thus legitimised.

Methodology

This study elicits insights from widows in Gauteng province. The main research question guiding the current study was: What are the experiences of Township widows in Gauteng province? The article is based on a qualitative research case study couched by radical feminism, which is located within the feminist paradigm. The data used for this article were part of a wider research project on "Widowhood issues in South Africa (WISA) conducted in township communities in Gauteng province". The interviews were one hour in length and were conducted by members of the WISA research team. Interviews were conducted with 20 widows. The information was obtained using a study sample of 20 widows from the population because it was impractical to include all widows in Gauteng. Widows were not comfortable being interviewed by male members in the research team because widowhood is such a sensitive topic. Therefore, the interviews were conducted by six female members of the research team. The positionality of the research team influenced the data collection and analysis. Three members of the research team were widowed and shared some similarities with the participants; therefore, they were able to build rapport and an honest and trustworthy relationship. The research

team has experience with qualitative research; therefore, positionality influenced the choice of data collection techniques, which is why this study was qualitative. In the research team there were two psychologists to handle delicate ventilations and the possibility of unearthing widows' traumatic experiences that may lead to crying and discomfort. The study included widows aged between 35-68 and widowed within 15 years. Drawing on the above explanation, this qualitative study adopted a purposive sampling technique (Creswell & Clark, 2018).

Thematic data analysis was used to analyse data in this study (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The following steps were followed: transcribing and familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes defining and naming themes and producing the report (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Trustworthiness validates the results of the research. According to Guba and Lincoln (Guba & Lincoln, 1994) there are four aspects to trustworthiness of a qualitative study: credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability.

Results were reported back to the research participants in an information session. As a researcher studying widowhood, our own life experiences, social background, and values shape how we view this topic. We recognise that we are not neutral observers. We acknowledge that personal background influences the questions we ask, how we listen to participants, and how we write their stories. We further acknowledged that the sample in this study was from a university linked project. Recognising this power difference and other biases we acknowledge that the knowledge produced is not imposed but co-created between participants and researchers. We further actively practiced reflexivity by keeping a personal journal during data collection to monitor how our questions might subtly direct responses or reflect our own assumptions about widowhood. We used this self-awareness during data analysis to question our initial interpretations, ensuring that the participants' lived experience remained central rather than filtered through researcher and institutional lens.

According to Bless et al. (2006), research ethics assists in avoiding research pitfalls and misuse. It promotes the accountability of researchers who must be guided by and respect the applicable ethics. The institution's ethical clearance committee at the University of South Africa granted permission to conduct the study. The study was informed by ethical principles, including non-maleficence, the autonomy of research participants, informed consent, anonymity, and confidentiality (Creswell & Clark, 2018). The use of pseudonyms safeguarded the participants identities. Safety was guaranteed as interviews were held in the participants' residences. The right to withdraw without consequence and the non-provision of financial incentives were emphasised. The following section describes the findings and the discussion of the present study.

Findings and discussion

Below, we discuss four significant themes that emerged from the data. Employing the radical feminism theory as an interpretive lens, we develop vital findings to explain how the framework was operationalised to constitute a viable approach for widowhood support in township contexts. The table below (Table 1) shows the participants' demographic information.

Table 1: Participants' demographic information

Pseudonym	Age	Years widowed	Ethnic group
Khomani	52	10	Tswana
Pharoni	45	7	Xhosa
Sedoni	68	13	Pedi
Ranata	54	8	Tsonga
Dipuna	44	9	Venda
Phukani	49	11	Zulu
Botatu	66	12	Tswana
Dipomo	60	14	Sotho
Dipane	40	5	Pedi
Phumako	51	10	Zulu
Gubhazi	39	4	Venda
Dalani	47	9	Zulu
Dumani	51	10	Tsonga
Themano	61	13	Tswana
Ramunda	42	6	Venda
Setoni	48	9	Pedi
Msezani	47	8	Tsonga
Tselini	55	5	Pedi
Fikani	46	7	Zulu
Zanedi	52	12	Xhosa

The findings are presented in the following sequence: In-law weaponisation of rituals, community stigma and discrimination, dispossession of assets by in-laws and absence of support systems.

In-law weaponisation of rituals

Data sources revealed that cultural laws and rituals in widowhood may have been intended to be a symbol of mourning and change, but some practices can be dangerous and pose a threat to the human rights and dignity of widows. Khomani revealed that after her husband's burial, some cultural practices and rituals were performed to and for her. She had this to say:

> *As a widow, you will be told that after your husband dies, you are required to [cleanse] yourself. There is that notion that you still have your husband's [aura/shadow] on your body, and they need to cleanse you. Something about the dirt that is remaining, I am not sure. They light incense for you; some things they tell you to add into your soft porridge or in [Mageu] so that they can cleanse you. But I don't encourage people to do those things because some are not right, especially if the person doing it for you is not your parent or family.*

Pharoni shared her negative experiences with cleaning rituals that were performed on her when her husband passed away.

> *Yes, my husband's family performed cultural rituals. Those rituals negatively affected me; that is why I mentioned that I received deliverance at church. I don't know about other people's experiences, but in my case, I would be sitting at home and suddenly I would see scary visions.*

Sedoni added and expressed how rituals that were performed affected her negatively and said:

> *I was at peace at night, but it was like a movie during the day. I would either see my husband, or I would see snakes, those types of things – things that are not good for you.*

Dube (2022) argues that in-laws are opportunistic as they use cultural norms to prolong violence against the bereaved widows since isolation is often imposed on the widows by their in-laws. Zanedi revealed that it is essential to protect yourself during the mourning period and ensure that you are assisted by someone you can trust when performing any rituals. She said:

> *Your mother should be the one doing everything for you, and if you do not have a mother, your sister should do them because we do not know the measure of our in-law's love for us. They might cast a spell on those clothes, and after you wear them, you would die as well; they would cover it up, saying, 'She died because she loved her husband,' that period is a window of opportunity for them.*

Tselini further cautioned that widows should rely on family members when performing customs and rituals to avoid dangers. She said:

> *In my opinion, when your husband dies, get your side of the family to perform these customs for you. Do not allow your husband's side of the family to take on that role; you will die and leave your children. These are the kinds of things you encounter in life when your husband dies. People use this time to take your life and cover it up by saying that you died because your heart was broken over your husband's death.*

Khomani added that:

> *People are different. Others use traditional medicine with good intentions; they give you the medicine, and it cleanses you, and you feel good. And then, others will give you traditional medicine that has something else in it. That is why I say not to leave it to your in-laws to perform these customs for you; let it be your family that performs them.*

Instead of providing psychosocial support, in-laws take advantage of widows' vulnerability by endangering their lives. Statements by participants suggest in-laws victimise widows by weaponising cultural rituals when they offer harmful cleansing mechanisms, thus eliminating trust among families. Cultural rituals become sites of control and danger disguised as cleansing methods. Suspicions of poisoning signal deeper social anxieties among in-laws, especially in contexts that attribute misfortune to an external cause such as witchcraft. Widows' recommendation of alternative sources of care suggests their ability to resist and negotiate oppressive systems for their wellbeing. Motsoeneng and Modise (2020) caution that widowhood rites can contribute to social stigma, and the perception of widows may be influenced by prevailing gender norms. Dube (2022) argues that in-laws are opportunistic as they use cultural norms to prolong violence against the bereaved widows. Widowhood rites depict the sexual politics of power and control of women's bodies (Millett, 1970; Rich, 1980), underscoring patriarchy as a system that dominates women even after the death of her husband. Consequently, the family institution perpetuates and sustains patriarchy in the subjugation of women's bodies to cultural obligation (Mama, 1995; Millett, 1970; Tamale, 2011). On the other hand, Kotze et al. (2012) explain that mourning practices may be well-intentioned and aimed at showing respect to the departed, however, the way they are carried out often harms, disrespects and disregards

widow's rights (Manala, 2015), suggesting that many widows in Black communities tend to experience injustice and discrimination despite the values of Ubuntu (Manala, 2015). Ubuntu – an African philosophy of care and humility, becomes non-existent and constrained by counter behaviours in the context of harmful cultural rites performed on widows. Sustainable Development Goal target 5.1 argues for the elimination of all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation (UN, 2015). Therefore, in this study, radical feminism critically challenges harmful gendered expectations and cultural rites framed as tradition in relation to widow's wellbeing and autonomy.

Community stigma and discrimination

The results show that widows experienced stigma and discrimination at different levels. A stigma exists where widows are perceived as having more sexual interest than other women. Consequently, they were eyed with suspicion by women in the community: "Widows have more sexual desire than married women, which is why we have to keep an eye on them, not to steal our husbands (Motsoeneng, 2022, p. 79)." Ranata had this to say:

> *I was 42 years old and had a small frame. The problem with the community is women; when your husband dies, it means you are automatically not supposed to be greeted by another woman's husband in the streets; if he asks how, you and your children are doing, they will think that you want to steal that man from his wife.*

Ramunda explained the isolation and discrimination that widows experience during the morning period. She stated that:

> *My food was prepared separately, and the utensils I ate with were also kept separately.*

Setoni added and explained that isolation and discrimination made her feel like a social outcast and that she was given justifications for the isolation and discrimination to silence her. She said:

> *You do feel discriminated against by society as a widow. I was required to live in isolation during the mourning period and told that isolation would give me time to grieve and protect the community from bad luck associated with death.*

Mabunda and Ross (2023) assert that South African widows are subjected to restrictions on their freedom of movement, participation in specific activities, modes of dress, sitting arrangements, the use of distinct utensils, and cleansing rituals. Dipuna indicated that even social institutions like banks remain unsympathetic and oppressive to widows when their husbands die. She explained that the bank repossessed her husband's car immediately after he died, offering her no payment arrangements or policy that would settle the car since her husband was no more. She had this to say about her experience:

> *So, I went to the bank to explain that the car was still there, but the owner had passed away; I asked to continue making the payments for the car just as he was doing, they said that that won't be possible, they require the full amount because the owner has passed away. When I asked about the full amount, they said something around R80-000.00; I told them I don't have that much money. At the time, my husband's pension had not been paid out. So, they told me that they are going to get the car, and I said they can come take it, no problem. They repossessed the car and auctioned it off.*

Dube (2023) asserts that widows face exclusions and oppression from a socio-economic, cultural, and psychosocial perspective upon their husbands' death. Ikpeme (2020) has argued that social stigma is widely experienced by widows in Africa. In Africa, widows are prone to stigma and exclusion from

their communities due to cultural beliefs that associate widowhood with bad luck, curses. This makes widows in Africa feel extremely isolated, discriminated, and mistreated (Dube, 2022). These structural inequalities when realised and practiced by communities reinforce harmful social norms around widowhood. Radical feminism grapples with female subjection to collective oppression which prevents women from exercising autonomy and agency over their private lives and desires (Rich, 1980). As Tamale (2011) argues, African women's bodies constitute sites of political contestation, never private, however regulated by culture and tradition as patriarchal tools of authority. Gqola (2015) notes that South African women's bodies bear the brunt of masculinity performance, signalling the persistence of gender inequality structurally within families, communities and society. Sustainable Development goal target 5.2 advocates for the end of all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere (UN, 2015).

Dispossession of assets from in-laws

Baloyi (2016) posits that when widows are transitioning between the loss of their husbands and going back to living their normal lives it becomes the most abnormal and hazardous time for the widow. Mavhandu-Mudzusi (2020, p. 33) shared her grandmother's experience when she was told about "how everything her children had worked for was taken away when her husband died," and having to relocate. Similar sentiments were revealed in this study, and this expresses how widows have been silently losing property and different assets after losing spouses. Van de Walle (2017) explains that in Zimbabwe, Uganda, Kenya, Burundi, and Mali, for example, widows are not entitled to inherit their husband's property, which can leave them financially vulnerable and without a means of supporting themselves and their children. Dube (2023) also concurs with the fact that widows are sometimes forced to leave their homes and communities. Dalani shared her experience when her husband died, and in-laws demanded her husband possessions but also ensured that she was isolated from the family after burial. She said:

> *It became very difficult as a childless young widow because you are immediately faced with disinheritance from in-laws and social isolation.*

Dumani explained that dispossession of assets by in-laws sometimes happen in a subtle form or very forceful and threatening ways. She explained:

> *As widows we are being disinherited assets such as houses, lands, cars and or forceful removal from our homes.*

It is important to note that some African families become very supportive to the widow and children after husbands died and do not dispossess the widow of the assets or inheritance. For example, Themane had this to say:

> *No, on my husband's side of the family, not even one person bothered me. Nobody came and said, "We want this. Why don't you do this? Why are you doing this? I don't want to lie; they never did such."*

The connection between Ubuntu and widow's wellbeing is complex as this framework is characterised by care, solidarity and support on one hand can be used against widows to constrain and abuse them. Themane's counter statement to the common politics of dispossession of assets suggests that Ubuntu values can vary among families practicing a similar culture, which when fostered well can enhance more equitable relations among members. To demonstrate the engendered-ness of widowhood discrimination in African societies and its ties to economic aggression, findings from Zimbabwe show that inheritance laws often favour male heirs, leaving widows with little or no rights to their husband's property while in Kenya, widows are often disinherited or forced to share their husband's property

with his other wives or relatives (Isilow, 2017). In Nigeria, widows face discriminatory laws that deny them the right to inherit their husband's property (Izzi & Fab-Eme, 2020). In South Africa, widows may face legal battles with their in-laws over property rights (Sithole, 2020; The Mail and Guardian, 2023) with widows circumventing this struggle by adhering to cultural rituals due to fear of disinheritance or being expelled from their homes (Baloyi, 2016; Hugo, et al., 2026). Mahajan (2022, p.5) states that radical feminism addresses interpersonal and intrapersonal issues of women and encourages them to change the status quo through an active voice. It is described as "a struggle against sexism where male supremacy and female oppression take place." As projected by the participants, discrimination on widows comes in many forms including the perpetration of female-on-female violence (Hugo et al., 2026), where women in-laws act within the structural constraints and incentives formed by patriarchal systems, further sustaining the patriarchy system (Mama, 1995; Firestone, 1970). During the mourning period, widows experience tremendous stress connected to finances, property and the loss of a spouse, making it difficult for them to actively address issues against in-law oppression, underscoring the need for multiple support systems from the family and society, which have been found to be limited. It is evident that in-laws infringe on widows' legal eligibility to property, which provides evidence to a prevailing discord between legal rights and social practices. The UN SDG 5A promotes reforms to give women equal rights to economic resources, as well as access to ownership and control over land and other forms of property, financial services, inheritance and natural resources, in accordance with national laws (UN, 2015).

Absence of social support systems

Widowhood as a process is characterised by pain, isolation, a sense of loss, victimisation, uncertainty and fear (Tiro et al., 2026). We argue that when a loved one dies, the bereaved person needs support from friends, relatives, colleagues, fellow congregants and other community members. Chami and Pooley (2021) and Sekgobela et al. (2020) assert that widows struggle with deep seated grief, an elevated risk of maladjustment, depression, and uncertain life changes. To overcome these challenges, social support is pivotal. However, widows in this study revealed that there is limited social support within the South African context. Botatu explained the void and absence of support after her husband died and said:

> *My husband was a very good person; he was loving and caring. Whatever we needed, he provided. He was a supportive person, whether it was his side of the family or my side, he was very supportive. He was the person everyone called for assistance whenever there was something happening. But now, I feel like widows have no support at all.*

Emotional support is important to allow widows to process their loss rationally and be able to rebuild their lives (Nelson & Iyer, 2026). Dipomo explained that she was still dealing with the loss of her husband and did not receive any form of counselling. She said:

> *He fell sick for only two days; he had a terrible headache, and after the headache, he got worse; it seemed like he was experiencing a stroke; he didn't know who he was, and stuff like that.*

Dipane emphasised the importance of emotional and psychological support when she said:

> *You know when you are used to doing everything with a person, you eat together, you sleep on the same bed; you miss him coming through the gate after knocking off from work; when that time comes around, you ask yourself, "Why me?" and that's when you start feeling unwell – those are the things that used to stress me out. I feel that widows need constant emotional and psychological support to cope.*

Another participant, Phumako raised the importance of providing relevant and effective counselling for widows counselling as they deal with trauma and grief. She said:

> *I went for counselling in Pretoria. There is counselling available for the Police. They took me there. I only went there for one day; to tell you the truth, I only went there for one day. When I got there, they told me one-two-three, but I realised that it wasn't helpful for me.*

The findings of the study revealed that church is a spiritual and emotional supportive system identified by widows in this study. Pharoni had this to say:

> *The church received me with so much love, and even as we speak, I'm still attending, I am a member of that church. I got a lot of help at that church. What do I mean by help? I mean things such as deliverance, especially if you are a widow, you need a place where you can get deliverance, to at least forget that you are alone. To put God first, tell yourself that you are not alone. God is now my husband. God is my everything.*

Another participant, Gubhazi supported Pharoni utterances that the church plays a critical role in supporting widows: She stated that:

> *The first day I got there, I found the church to be nothing like what I had ever seen before in my life. When you enter the yard, you already feel like you are in a different place. Sometimes I would feel like staying behind when the church service ended, living there every day, because I forget about everything when I am there.*

Clearly, some churches offer psychosocial support in the context of widowhood struggles, although they operate as external bodies when compared to families. They go as far as restoring widow's dignity to affirm them as humans, which counter the stigma and marginalisation inflicted by in-laws and communities (Baloyi,2024). This means that churches play a significant role in shaping positive lived experiences for widows. On the contrary, African scholars (Manala, 2015; Matlabe-Danke, 2025; Khosa-Nkantini et al., 2020) found that many African mainline and Pentecostal churches mirror the traditional practices that ostracise widows other than embracing them in their time of need. It is important to note the complexities between church values and the extent of actioning those values as church members are not exempt from discriminating widows because they also belong to the same communities that illtreat widows and are therefore, governed by the same social norms. Some families and social norms disapprove widows to remarry or have intimate relationships (Matlabe-Danke, 2025), which raises questions on Pharoni's statement that, "God is now my husband", whether church influence prevailed or by in-laws' authority. Such views complicate the view of church as places of refuge and rehabilitation for widows while resubjecting them to patriarchy. Using Mama's (1995) view, church becomes a survival strategy from the neglect of families and society. Radical feminism forces us to think critically about the freedom of female bodies, how men (even women) abuse and exploit other women by commanding their bodies and shaping their autonomy. As Jensen (2021, p. 4) observes, the primary goal of radical feminism as "the end of patriarchy's gender system, not merely expanding women's choices within patriarchy". SDG5 A implores nations to adopt and strengthen sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls including widows (UN, 2015).

Limitations

This research is a qualitative study conducted in a Township context in Gauteng. Thus, findings cannot be extended to other communities. However, we argue that the intention of this study was not to generalise its findings but, rather, to understand a practical case that can be used to unravel discourse about radical feminism and its contribution in addressing challenges faced by widows in

Gauteng. The study recommends further research on radical feminism within traditional leadership context. The proposed research should include action research that will test the utilisation of the proposed Radical feminism framework for widowhood support in different contexts as presented in the limitations under this section. Therefore, we are convinced that a study of this magnitude may be conducted in other contexts where widows are faced with challenges.

Recommendations

This study asked the question What are the experiences of widows in Gauteng province? Radical in this study does not mean "extreme" or "outrageous" but rather a process of going to the roots of something, of digging deeper and deeper to understand a system, structure, or phenomenon (Fahs, 2024). We argue that interventions should adopt a holistic perspective, acknowledge the complex interplay of factors and implement integrated strategies with a radical stance (Ngoven, 2021; Dube, 2022). We recommend that interventions should aim to provide widows with economic empowerment, education opportunities, and improved access to healthcare services (Van De Walle, 2018). Moreover, South African governmental organisations such as the Commission on Gender Equality in South Africa, the Department of Social Development and the Department of Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities should provide community level educational workshops on widow empowerment in finances, legal and human rights to widows, community members and in collaboration with traditional leaders. These organisations should ensure to monitor the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act, 2000 (PEPUDA) as enacted by the South African Parliament. The main contribution of this study is the proposed radical feminism framework for widowhood support indicated under Figure 1. The radical feminism framework for widowhood support is underpinned by economic empowerment and training of widows, communal spirit and cultural support, social movement for widows, provision of legal empowerment and support, principles advancing humanness, dignity and respect for widows and partnership for widowhood support and empowerment.



Figure 1: Radical feminism framework for widowhood support

Economic empowerment and training in the framework respond to the statement by Dumani when she explained that dispossession of assets by in-laws sometimes happen in a subtle form or very forceful and threatening ways. She explained:

> *As widows we are being disinherited assets such as houses, land, cars or forceful removal from our homes.*

According to Millett (1970) patriarchal ideology positions men as dominant, strong, and masculine, while women are considered weak, submissive, and feminine. As a result, widows are consistently placed in a subordinate position that disadvantages them economically. Provision of legal empowerment and support recommendation in this study is linked to the finding where Dipuna indicated that even social institutions like banks remain unsympathetic and oppressive to widows when their husbands die. She explained that the bank repossessed her husband's car immediately after he died, offering her no payment arrangements or policy that would settle the car since her husband was no more. Ogundipe-Leslie (1993) asserts that the need to support the cause of feminism and social justice in Africa has never been stronger than it is under the present conditions.

The recommendation of the formation of social movement for widows in the framework responds to the finding in the study which states that widows experience isolation and discrimination during the morning period.

Amadiume (2006) emphasises the importance of social movements and states that the diversity in African feminism means that women of different classes, religions, and political persuasions are making different demands and campaigning on different issues.

This study concurs with African feminist scholars (Mama, 2011; Hudson-Weems, 1997; Ogundipe-Leslie, 1993) that African women can and do speak their conditions, needs, and rights, and have played an important role in the cause of social justice. Mama (2011) asserts that feminist researchers must bring feminist theorisations, concepts and strategies aimed at demystifying existing gendered systems of domination and developing critical understandings and analyses of all aspects of women's lives and gender relations. It is against this background that this study proposes a radical feminism framework aimed at mitigating systems of domination experienced by African widows.

Institutional Review Board Statement

The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the University of South Africa College of Education Ethics Review Committee.

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